



Blood River Heritage Site

A declared National Monument
(on the KwaZulu-Natal Battlefields route)

Managed by the Voortrekker Monument and Nature Reserve, Pretoria

Welcome to what is probably the most unique battlefield in South Africa. It is here where the Voortrekkers fought against the mighty Zulu army on the morning of 16 December 1838. The battle site is unique in south Africa in that it is the only site where both sides have interpreted the battle dissimilarly and where a visit to the two sites (Blood River and Ncome), is imperative to gain a balanced picture of events.

Although various and often conflicting interpretations on the events leading to the battle exist, historians in general concur on what happened on 16 December 1838 at Blood River/Ncome. Based on this and on a greater desire to work together, the two museums are increasingly being marketed as a single tourist attraction. It in no way distracts from the unique positions and inviolable status and emotion that Blood River and the Covenant that was made there, occupies in the hearts of the descendants of the Voortrekkers.

Facilities at the site include:

- The "Trekker-kitchen" a traditional restaurant where meals can be served to groups of up to 40 people. (Groups larger than five have to book in advance).
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- The "Smouswa" is a curio shop selling relevant souvenirs, post cards, books, DVD's, videos, etc.
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- An interpretive exhibition on the battle that was opened in December 2002.
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- Limited overnight accommodation. Picnic, camping and caravan facilities are available.

An unforgettable experience!

For more information:

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WHAT CAN BE SEEN ON THIS SITE? (See map on the back)

VISITOR CENTRE (A ON MAP)

The Blood River visitor centre was designed by Mr Hannes Meiring and completed in 1996. The battle of Blood River is placed in context with the broad South African history in the museum. Attention is also given to persons who have made contributions to the monuments on the site. Refreshments and souvenirs are available in the "Trekkerkombuis" and the "Smouswa" souvenir shop.

JAW-BONE WAGON MONUMENT (KAKEBEENWA) (B ON MAP)

The centenary committee already approached South African artist Coert Steynberg as early as 1928 to design a monument. The design of a wagon jawbone model in granite was generally approved and completed in 1938 but due to the onset of the Second World War, it was only inaugurated in 1947 near the Ncome River. Initially it was erected over the stone cairn (D on the map) with a window inside the wagon through which the stone cairn could be seen. When the new wagon laager (E on map) was erected in 1971, the granite wagon was moved to its present position. The wagon symbolises the pioneers' (Voortrekkers') home, stronghold and church.

PYRAMID SHAPED STONE CAIRN (C ON MAP)

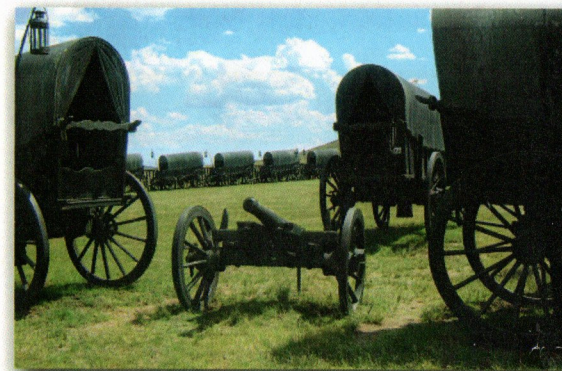
The pyramid shaped stone cairn was constructed during the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek as a beacon of the renewal of the Covenant. East of the cairn, the tracks of the Johanna van der Merwe centenary wagon have been cast in concrete to preserve them for posterity and north of the cairn the tracks of the FAK Natalia wagon were cast in cement during the 150th anniversary of the Great Trek in 1988.

STONE PILE (D ON MAP)

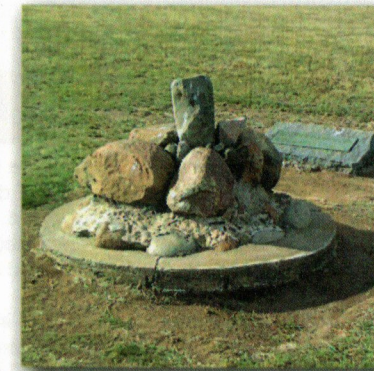
This stone pile is the oldest commemorative monument on the site. It was erected on 16 December 1866 when 40-50 wagons gathered to commemorate the battle of Blood River. Those present placed the rocks in a pile more or less in the centre where the original wagon laager was supposed to have stood. A number of the Voortrekkers and even an old Zulu warrior who were participants in the battle, were present. The words of the Covenant have been placed in Afrikaans and English on either side of the pile on commemorative plaques.

BRONZE WAGON LAAGER (E ON MAP)

The wagon laager was erected as a replica of the original laager and was not meant to be a monument. The laager was erected on the same site as the original laager of 1838 and inaugurated in December 1971. It is regarded as unique in the world. The cast iron wagons were covered with a thin coating of bronze and they rest on concrete foundations. Each wagon is identical and modelled on the example of the Johanna van der Merwe Centenary wagon. The uncovered wagons inside the laager represent the ammunition wagons that were used. Wattle was used to reconstruct the original wooden barricades (veghekke).



BRONZE WAGON LAAGER



STONE PILE IN WAGON LAAGER



PYRAMID-SHAPED STONE CAIRN



3-POUND SHIP'S GUN

3-POUND SHIP'S GUN (F ON MAP)

Andries Pretorius brought the gun with him from the Cape colony. It was mounted on a light chassis with two wheels. The gun is aimed in an easterly direction across the river. When loaded with shrapnel, pieces of cast iron and stones, it had a range of at least 1 000 metres.

OLD "GRIETJIE" (G & H ON MAP)

According to certain historians there were only two guns at the battle of Blood River whilst others believe there were at least three. The gap in the northern side of the laager served as a "door" through which the mounted Voortrekkers could exit in pursuit of the Zulus. The ship's gun Grietjie was mounted on a chassis of plough wheels and had a range of between 300-400 metres. The original gun is on display in the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria.

THE BATTLE OF BLOOD RIVER - BRIEF HISTORY

Many Voortrekkers, having left the British governed Cape Colony to establish an independent government, chose Natal as their destination. Their leader at the time, Piet Retief, negotiated with the Zulu King Dingane for land. During their last visit to Mgungundlovu on 6 February 1838, Retief and his comrades were killed on command of King Dingane. Hundreds of Voortrekkers and their servants were massacred at Bloukrans and Weenen during follow-up attacks.

Andries Pretorius arrived in Natal in November 1838 and was elected as the new Voortrekker leader. Pretorius immediately organised a punitive commando consisting of approximately 64 wagons and 464 Voortrekkers (all male) accompanied by the same number of servants and wagon attendants. On December 9, 1838 the Voortrekkers made a Covenant with God, that should He grant them victory over the overwhelming Zulu force, they would commemorate that day as a Sabbath and erect a church in His name. The Covenant was repeated until the evening of December 15.

The wagons were placed strategically on the banks of the Ncome River. The Zulus attacked with between 12000 and 15000 warriors on the morning of Sunday, 16 December. They launched attack after attack but to no avail. By 11 :00 the Zulus started to retreat. Pretorius immediately sent a mounted force in pursuit. Many Zulu warriors were killed in their attempt to cross the river, hence the name Blood River. The pursuit lasted 3 hours and the Zulu force was defeated. An estimated three thousand (3 000) warriors were killed. Only three Voortrekkers, - including Pretorius were wounded.

The pursuing commando reached Dingane's royal kraal, Mgungundlovu on 20 December. It was burnt to the ground and deserted. The remains of Retief and his men were found on a nearby hill, KwaMatiwane. The treaty that Dingane and Retief had signed was found in Retief's shoulder bag. According to the treaty Dingane had relinquished a certain piece of land in Natal to the Voortrekkers.

On the opposite side of the Ncome River is a museum erected by the South African Government in 1999 to honour the Zulu impi who paid the ultimate price in battle.

